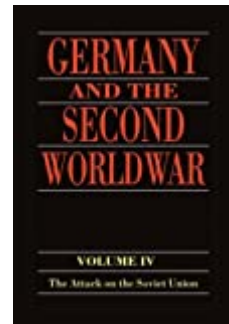




Horst Boog; et al. *Germany and the Second World War, Vol. IV: The Attack on the Soviet Union.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. xxxii + 1364 pp. \$225.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-822886-8.



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Potsdam's *Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt* devotes this indispensable volume to detailed examination of the origin, preparation, course, and immediate aftermath of Operation Barbarossa, which began on June 22, 1941. The essays make clear the monumental paradoxes that characterize the Wehrmacht's initial attempt to smash the Red Army, based on Blitzkrieg tactics used successfully thirteen months earlier to crush the French Army. Military experts who considered the French Army the finest such formation in the world at the beginning of World War II did not remotely expect Operation Barbarossa to culminate in a disastrous Wehrmacht failure to reach Moscow. On the other hand, Stalin did not expect Red Army offensives, immediately after the Wehrmacht rout, to similarly end in catastrophe. The first six months of the Russo-German war demonstrate that both dictators, Stalin and Hitler, could hardly have made worse misjudgments about each other's military establishments.

This dramatic sequence of events still does not wholly explain the profound interest today in the campaign. (The bibliography for the volume is ninety-five pages long). What does explain the interest is that had Hitler triumphed, Germany would have possessed Russia's limitless natural resources, Britain would probably have yielded, and Washington could have looked forward to

acknowledging Berlin's dominance or to fighting a war between continents in which the enemy had far greater resources of manpower and industrial might than did the world's last great democratic power. The campaign was, indisputably, the most critical of the war.

Yet, how to deal with Operation Barbarossa's paradoxes? At the same time Berlin made valid claims about overwhelming victories in Byelorussia and Ukraine, the campaign was a failure. Juergen Foerster writes that "After only two weeks, [General Franz] Halder and Hitler regarded the campaign as won. Yet only a few days later it became apparent that the first operational objectives had been achieved only geographically, not militarily; the 'mass of the Russian army' west of the Dnieper-Dvina line had not been destroyed" (p. 1251).

Not surprisingly, much of this volume is taken up with answering the key question: Why did the operation fail if when it began Germany arguably had the finest generals and most highly-trained troops of any army in the world? One answer is that preparations by a military force that prided itself on thoroughness were even more haphazard and reckless than earlier writers have thought. Germany's arms production in World War II's second year had barely increased, "whereas in the United States, Britain, and the USSR it had almost doubled over the same period" (p. 216). Among conse-

quences were that the Wehrmacht invaded Russia with fewer artillery pieces than had been available against France. And eighty-four infantry divisions and three of ten motorized divisions had to be equipped with foreign vehicles.

Another answer, related to the first, is that Hitler and his generals grossly underestimated the probable costs of war in the East, while Stalin and his generals grossly overestimated Red Army capabilities. In May and June 1941, the Germans could scarcely believe that Russians had not noticed giant concentrations of men and weapons across the border; in fact, Russians did notice, but Stalin refused to believe that Hitler, his only friend among European statesmen, planned an attack. The degrees to which both sides then blundered would reach cosmic levels in engagements during September and October. Ignoring Marshal Georgi Zhukov's advice, Stalin forbade an evacuation of Kiev and lost (according to German claims) 665,000 men taken prisoner along with 884 tanks and 3718 guns.[1] By September 4, writes Ernst Klink, "In half of the [German] divisions envisaged for [the encirclement of Vyaz'ma] approximately 34 per cent of the tanks were, on average, ready for action" (p. 667). By the end of that engagement (which included the elimination of a pocket at Bryansk) the Soviets had lost possibly another 675,000 men taken prisoner; Soviet forces outside Moscow appear to have been reduced to just 90,000 men. Meanwhile, the Wehrmacht sustained 134,999 battle casualties between October 3 and November 17.[2]

Wehrmacht troops, compelled to live off the land, committed acts that will forever stain the honor of the German Army. Foerster, who addresses Nazi "pacification" programs in two essays, does not in any way excuse or condone the unspeakable treatment of civilians. To the contrary, he makes clear the Wehrmacht's culpability in developing policies. Foerster also emphasizes the utter cynicism of such senior officers as General Carl Heinrich von Stuelpnagel, who reported concerns in mid-August 1941 that the "Draconian measures against the Jews [had aroused] pity and sympathy [for them] among some circles of the population" (p. 1200). Meanwhile, Germany's Economic Organization East approved mass murders on grounds that "Jews, who form at least a third and often over half of the population in the towns, have in many cases openly expressed their hostility to and their hatred of Germany through whispering campaigns, and occasionally through illegal meetings" (p. 1143).

Nor does Joachim Hoffmann overlook the extent to which Soviet troops committed the same types of crimes as did Germans or how Anglo-Americans turned a blind eye to Soviet atrocities. Ample evidence is offered to prove horrifying charges against both sides: In the war of annihilation fought on the Eastern Front, Germans shot and starved to death Red Army prisoners, and Russians did the same with their Wehrmacht prisoners. Both sides plundered and left civilians to freeze after destroying their homes.

The real problem fighting an enemy such as the Third Reich is one about which the essayists, unfortunately, have nothing to say. Briefly, to beat back fascism requires fascist methods. German terror and counter-terror had to be matched by Allied terror and counter-terror, and not just on the Eastern Front. In Western Europe, one Anglo-American response to German V-2s sent to destroy London as revenge for thousand-bomber raids on German cities was the devastation of Dresden, in mid-February 1945.

George Orwell writes, "The essential horror of army life (whoever has been a soldier will know what I mean by the essential horror of army life) is barely affected by the nature of the war you happen to be fighting in. Discipline, for instance, is ultimately the same in all armies. Orders have to be obeyed and enforced by punishment if necessary, the relationship of officer and man has to be the relationship of superior and inferior." [3]

That's the way it was, and that's one of the major lessons to be learned about the Eastern front from this volume.

Notes:

[1]. Eddy Bauer and consultant editors James L. Collins Jr. and Correlli Barnett, *The History of World War II* (New York: Military Press, 1984), 178.

[2]. H.P. Willmott, H.P., *The Great Crusade* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 156.

[3] George Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish War," originally published 1943, reprinted in *A Collection of Essays by George Orwell* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), 194.

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